



Philadelphia Spaces: “The Skaters”

What Abby Heller-Burnham’s “The Skaters” taps into is a unique sense of Philadelphia as a collection of spaces. Not all cities present a distinct, identifiable landscape— Philadelphia does. What Philadelphia has to do with, on this level, is a specific kind of chiaroscuro— how light and darkness intermix in such a way that the characteristic Philadelphian ambience (of the eerie, the fractured, and the macabre) is created and maintained at regular intervals and at varied locales. What elevates Philadelphia into a city of the macabre are its

contrasts, and surface/depth issues— often advertised as its opposite, Philadelphia is capable of bewildering its inhabitants into realizations of multi-dimensionality. The dynamic tension between extreme beauty and ugliness animates “The Skaters”— its gorgeousness and painterly effects are woven out of unpromising material. Heller-Burnham’s painterly sense of daring is transformative— yet, in the breach between subject and representation what muscles in is specifically the Philadelphian hint of the haunted or hauntedness.

Color tonalities in “The Skaters” might be seen as drastic and perverse by conventional and/or formalist sensibilities (Heller-Burnham studied at PAFA)— everything dark, earthy, muted, yet evanescent and dream-like too. That specific vision of Philadelphia— a city and city-scape not unfamiliar with the spectral— is not unknown to those with aesthetic sensitivities who live in Philadelphia; but not yet generally recognized by the world-stage art-world at large. Innovative works, Gertrude Stein wrote, must have their ugliness; and Heller-Burnham’s skaters are as grippingly “ugly” as Picasso’s whores were, painted precisely a century before; also feminized by ethereality.

Yet all of Philadelphia, and Philadelphia spaces, have a hinge to the spectral. New York art crowds complain that Philadelphia “dies” at night (whereas Manhattan maintains its frenetic pace)— but the odd, disjointed silences are uneasy, expressing the surface/depth tensions which Manhattan lacks. Sounds and forms jut out at strange angles, and spaces are ominous. One subtext of “The Skaters” is the beauty and magnetism of hidden things and the pleasures of concealment— also, that odd harmonies are built into certain kinds of visual (or auditory) discord. The flip-side of Philadelphia’s nocturnal quietude is levels, layering, and subtleties— an ambience subtly interwoven, rather than bluntly shoved in one’s face. Heller-Burnham’s craft or sullen art is a deconstruction of a certain kind of space with painterly effects, to engender and re-engender a whole whose harmonies and sense of aesthetic balance are contradictory. She quickly and easily turns the entire history of American representational art on its ear, including New York painting’s gratuitous and corrupt paltriness, its rejection of contemplative duration as a standard.

The sad self-parody of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko after Heller-Burnham is that Heller-Burnham manages to work abstract levels of

expressionism into constructs like “The Skaters” (through paint handling) amidst other levels of formal and thematic richness, which reduce the Cedar Bar crowd to mere aperitifs. It is appropriate that both the deconstruction and decimation of Abstract Expressionism has occurred in Philadelphia which, by being Janus-faced on every conceivable level, has perhaps more of a hinge than any other American city to the sense of history and depth built into the great cities of Western Europe.

Adam Fieled, 2013